

Adventure Central: Applying the "Demonstration Plot" Concept to Youth Development

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The Demonstration Plot Concept

Historically, land-grant research stations and the demonstration work pioneered by Seaman Knapp, who has been called the father of Extension, focused on demonstrating successful farming. Knapp described the importance of demonstration work best when he said:

*What a man hears he may doubt,
what he sees he may possibly doubt,
but what he does himself he cannot doubt.*

We believe the same argument can be made in the 21st century for Extension's work with youth and families. Following Knapp's example, Adventure Central in Dayton, Ohio, provides a "demonstration plot" to learn about what works for youth programming, particularly in urban areas.



Moving out of the ivory tower and exposing the academic to problems in the real world provides a potential for a real contribution to scholarship, and perhaps even directly to research.

George McDowell, 2001, *Land Grant Universities and Extension into the 21st Century*, p. 34

The fundamental and founding purpose [of the land-grant institution] is to use our educational resources to inform and improve the quality of life.

Graham Spanier, 1999, p. 199

A Demonstration Plot for Urban Youth Development – What Does It Mean?

Adventure Central is a learning laboratory in many ways. Through applied research projects, pilot programming, and on-going opportunities for teens, volunteers, college students, and staff members to learn through direct experience, Adventure Central is building capacity to deliver high quality educational programming and illustrate to others how it's done.

Key features include:

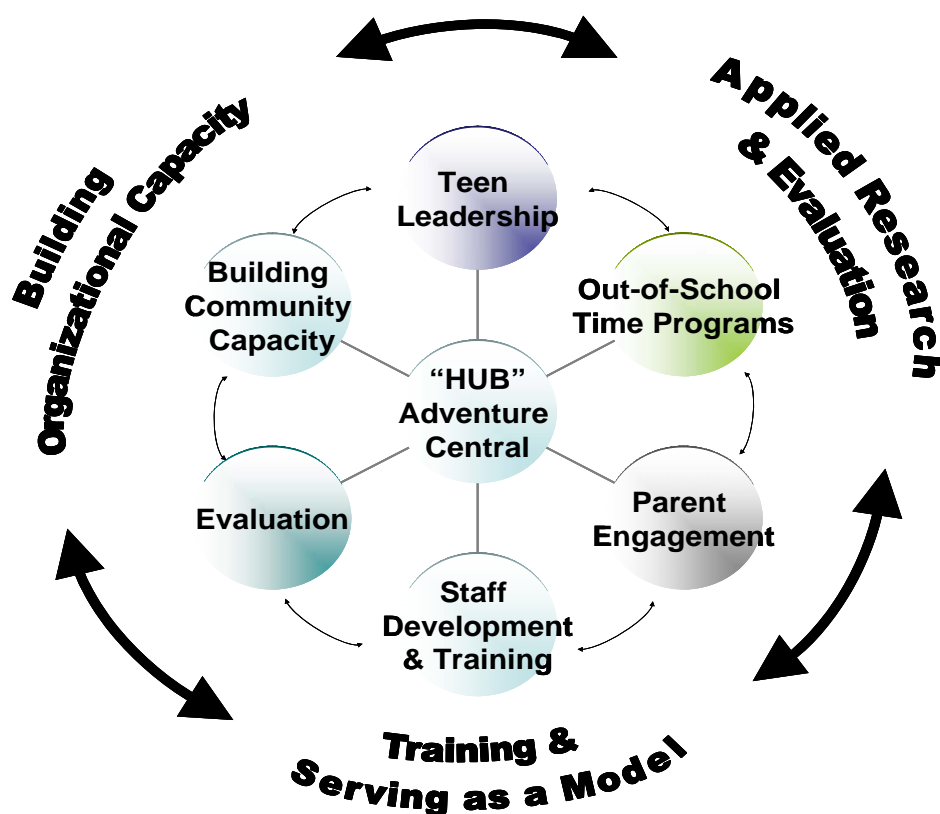
- Developed based on identified community need
- Programming aligned with best practices
- Continuous evaluation
- Application of evaluation findings to improve practice
- Sharing information and serving as a model

We believe Adventure Central represents a model of outreach for the 21st century land-grant institution. In the words of the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities (2000), it is a "conscious effort to bring the resources and expertise at our institutions to be on the community" (p. 10).

Adventure Central at Wesleyan MetroPark is a youth education center that targets urban youth in Dayton, Ohio. Adventure Central brings the 4-H experience into an urban environment for youth in kindergarten through age 18 during out-of-school hours. Opening its doors in October 2000, Adventure Central is made possible through a partnership between Ohio State University Extension, 4-H Youth Development and Five Rivers MetroParks.

Adventure Central's "Harvest" of Program Quality

- Research-based curriculum that incorporates life skills and experiential activities with a focus on communication and leadership, along with interesting subject matter.
- 8 Key Elements of Positive Youth Development--the underlying foundation
- Partnerships that capitalize on the strengths and resources of partners
- Program management practices that promote quality
 - People--professional role models and caring adults engaged with youth
 - Place--welcoming and safe environment (Looks Good, Feels Good)
 - Program--activities consistent with program themes, designed on an experiential learning model that includes time for reflection
- Program that engages youth participation for sufficient frequency, intensity, and duration to achieve desired outcomes



The Adventure Central Demonstration Model

The central hub and spokes of this model depict a high quality, relevant program developed to meet local needs. The "hub" is physically situated in an urban community. The first circle around the hub represents the activities that comprise the day-to-day work at Adventure Central. Because we are part of a land-grant university, with the mission to develop and disseminate new and practical knowledge to improve the quality of life, we conceive of our role to include both outreach to meet local needs and using the experience within the local community to inform our scholarly work. The outer circle illustrates our scholarly work in terms of discovery, integration, application, and teaching.

Based on Community Needs

Programming was developed based on a clearly identified community needs. Data were collected from over 40 representatives from the local community. They consistently indicated a lack of sufficient positive after-school and summer opportunities for youth, youth in the target neighborhoods were underserved, and youth development needs were not being met. The resulting effort at Adventure Central draws from the combined resources of Five Rivers MetroParks and OSU Extension.

Adventure Central – The Hub

The Adventure Central program is housed in a renovated one-floor building with an open, central reception area with lockers for youth to store their belongings. The building contains a multi-purpose room, kitchen, staff offices, five classrooms, and a mobile lab of fifteen laptop computers.

Situated on 50+ acres, outdoor space includes raised bed gardens and a fenced play yard. A short walk leads to the creek, where a bridge and recreation trail connects the two park areas. Hiking trails are scattered throughout the park providing an opportunity for a variety of interactions with the natural environment.



Adventure Central is a physical place, but it's more. The program consists of the total of all experiences, where the unstructured and informal aspects are as significant as the organized activities. Likewise, the program components are important, but so is the philosophy of positive youth development upon which they are based.

Current Program Highlights

Total Enrollment 387 youth and their parents

Over 71,000 contact hours with youth in after-school, day camp, and residential camping programs.

51% of youth attended at least 100 days of programming (some as many as 185 days)

117 Volunteers contributing over 9,400 hours

ADVENTURE CENTRAL'S MISSION

To promote positive youth development education and leadership skills using an environmental foundation in a welcoming, safe, fun, active setting that utilizes volunteers and community resources with adult and youth interaction.

Adventure Central – The Program Components

Youth Programming – Adventure Central serves as a hub for out-of-school time programming for school-age youth such as:

- structured after-school activities
- a youth leadership board
- clubs
- overnight camps
- summer day camps
- workforce preparation training and work-based learning experiences

The center is open for programming between 2:00 and 8:00 p.m. from Monday through Thursday, and offers expanded hours in the summer. Youth spend time getting help with homework, reading with volunteers, learning through hands-on activities, and forming positive relationships with caring adults. During this time, youth are provided with a meal and a program or activity that focuses on such topics as technology, gardening, science and nature, or health and nutrition. An emphasis is placed on hands-on, experiential activities utilizing research-based curriculum.

ADVENTURE CENTRAL'S GOALS

Provide Youth Development with an emphasis on environmental education, life skills, job readiness skills, character education, leadership skills, decision making, and discipline.

Provide Positive, Sustained Adult and Youth Interaction on an on-going basis through adult volunteers and others in the community.

Offer a Variety of Structured Events and Programs that are fun and utilize the environment, science, out-of-doors, and hands-on activities in a safe, caring setting.

Assume Young People Have a Say in Their Future and the program direction at Adventure Central.

Encourage Opportunities to Give Back to the community through service.

Parent Engagement – In 2003, Adventure Central was selected as one of two sites for Ohio's New Communities Project, part of the Children, Youth, and Families at Risk (CYFAR) grant. The emphasis was to enhance parent involvement in order to promote the holistic development of youth participants and to close the circle of support between school, home, and after school.

This focus is in alignment with research that parents' involvement in their children's lives is key to their academic achievement and overall healthy development. We conceptualize parent involvement to include the many ways that parents can be involved beyond being physically present at programs. Based on our experience, our research, and the application of these and other research findings, here is how we have worked to enhance parent engagement:

- **Dedicate staff resources to parent involvement.**

Adventure Central employs a full-time staff member to address family involvement and connections between home, after school, and school environments. The staff member is on-site daily at the program and makes regular contacts with parents, teachers, school officials, and community agencies. However, family engagement is also viewed as a role for *all* staff members. Program directors work to instill this expectation.

- **Focus on communication to build relationships and trust.**

In contrast, we have found that an equally important aspect of engaging families is the informal interactions and conversations that occur. While informal, these interactions are intentional, and much parent education is embedded in these contacts.

- **Plan specific activities to engage parents and evaluate these efforts.**

Adventure Central staff developed and expanded activities to foster family involvement. These activities included Family Reading/Literacy Nights, Family Fun Nights, educational events, field trips, and camping trips with team building activities. Evaluation of these activities showed that 100 percent of participants strongly agreed with the statement "This program was a positive experience for my family to spend time together."

Adventure Central – The People

The people are important! As a result the two 4-H Youth Development Educators from OSU Extension leading the Adventure Central project spent much of their time on staff development and training. We use the term "people" or "staff" broadly at Adventure Central to include our entire team composed of a diverse mix including paid staff, AmeriCorps members, college student interns, teens (paid and unpaid), and many community volunteers.

This diverse staff mix, in terms of background, age, sex, race, level of education, and other characteristics, is an important part of our success. We recruit, select and train staff and volunteers from the local community, and have been successful in engaging this group, most of whom are from an urban, low income community traditionally underserved by Extension. Last year, partnerships with

the University of Dayton's Semester of Service Program, University of Dayton Fitz Center for Leadership and Community, Ohio Community Computing Network, and Sisters of Notre Dame Mission Volunteer Program provided the service of six full-time AmeriCorps members.



The Adventure Central team places an

emphasis on professional role models and caring adults engaged with youth in experiential learning. Research supports that caring youth-staff relationships may be the most critical element to program success (Rhodes, 2004; Shortt, 2002). Engaging adults creates the opportunity for youth to create a valuable relationship with a caring adult and we have found that these relationships contribute to improved youth attendance and engagement (Paisley & Ferrari, 2006).

Our goal in staff development is to help each individual learn, grow and make positive contributions. An atmosphere that values learning is fostered, making the work experience a learning experience for both teens and adult staff. This is accomplished through intentional development and training activities for the entire team that include a combination of one-on-one teaching, group teaching, and external training opportunities.

A comprehensive orientation and training program for staff and teen and adult volunteers who work with youth at Adventure Central is focused on developing leadership skills and abilities as a foundation for positive youth development and includes an individual orientation/ training and group training sessions held throughout the year.

The orientation and training components are:

- Orientation for staff includes 4-H philosophy, behavior management, youth protection and volunteer responsibilities.
- Training sessions developed for staff and volunteers have a focused on skills and abilities to support the 8 Key Elements of 4-H Youth Development.
- Skills addressed in training opportunities have included teamwork, communication, problem solving, strategic planning, program planning, time management, grant management, nutrition, and specific curricula to be used with youth.



Applied Research and Evaluation

Evaluation is used to improve the program at Adventure Central on an on-going basis. Evaluation methods used include:

- Interviews
- Observation
- Focus groups
- Youth surveys and self-assessment
- Adult mentor assessments
- End-of-program surveys
- Review of participation measures
- Annual parent survey

Using multiple evaluation methods, several studies indicate that Adventure Central is meeting the developmental needs of its participants (Ferrari, Futris, Smathers, Cochran, Arnett, & Digby, 2006; Ferrari, Paisley, Turner, Cochran, Arnett, & McNeely, 2002; Ferrari & Turner, 2006; Paisley & Ferrari, 2005).

In addition, focus groups and surveys indicate that parents believe their child is experiencing a variety of educational and social benefits due to their participation (Ferrari et al., 2006). Social skills and school performance were mentioned most often. Results of this evaluation led to expanded offerings of family learning experiences.

Continuous monitoring and evaluation ensures that the programs at Adventure Central are aligned with best practices in youth development. Programs include essential elements such as opportunities to develop mastery, practice community service, set goals, and make decisions. These key elements, from the National 4-H Impact Study (2001; Kress, 2005; see box below), represent features of youth development programs that have been strong support in the literature (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

Key Elements of Positive Youth Development

Belonging Relationships with caring adults Physically and emotionally safe environment Welcoming environment that fosters belonging	Mastery Opportunities for engagement in learning Opportunities to build mastery and competence
Independence Opportunities for self-determination Opportunities to see oneself in the future	Generosity Opportunities to value and practice service

However, the results of evaluation affect not only what we do at Adventure Central, but are applied more broadly to the practice of conducting youth development programs. Extending beyond Adventure Central is accomplished through presentations and publications that share the results of our work. From 2001-2006, scholarly output related to Adventure Central resulted in peer-reviewed journal articles, peer-reviewed presentations, and presentations to OSU Extension professionals. On the macro level, we are engaged in scholarly work that will help build organizational capacity in areas such as leadership, partnerships, evaluation, and funding.

Another example is the addition of Adventure Central to the Harvard Family Research Project's Out-of-School Time Evaluation Database in 2006. The database currently contains profiles of 105 programs and their evaluation results. The database provides accessible information about large and small out-of-school time programs to support the development of high quality evaluations and programs in the out-of-school time field.

Harvard Family Research Project's Out-of-School Time Evaluation Database

Adventure Central's Profile:

<http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/mott/ac.pdf>

Entire Evaluation Database:

<http://www.gse.harvard.edu/projects/afterschool/evaldatabase.html>

Training and Serving as a Model

Adventure Central has evolved to serve as a model program. Because Adventure Central is an Extension-managed facility where programs occur on-site, a unique opportunity exists to act as a learning laboratory within a community-based setting.

Adventure Central has hosted visitors from across Ohio, as well as other states and countries, including Armenia, Georgia, and Uzbekistan. Others seek advice via phone and e-mail. Beyond scholarly outlets, Adventure Central is highlighted in reports (e.g., Ohio 4-H Foundation), newspaper articles, and parks and recreation publications.

Another example is when Adventure Central hosted a two-day training session for 62 staff from 15 4-H Afterschool demonstration sites from around the state in 2005. Participants engaged in hands-on learning sessions during the day, and then were able to interact with program participants and see after-school programming in action. Participants reported that these sessions were highly successful in providing both the concepts and the confidence needed to go back to their communities and use the activities with youth. The potential to continue hosting similar trainings is being explored by the Ohio 4-H Youth Development Afterschool Priority Team.

Building Community and Organizational Capacity

By expanding and enhancing the local skill base and the role staff, volunteers and teens play in out-of-school time programming, program impact enhanced. Significant capacity has been built during the six years Adventure Central has been operating. The Extension Educators providing leadership have been able to build a team of local staff who are providing most of the daily leadership for on-going programming. Through our approach to building a program model that is based on current best practices and focused on creating a learning environment, we are building community capacity by:

- Expanding and enhancing the local skills base
- Supporting after-school programming at other sites
- Nurturing professionals who then go on to work for other agencies, taking the positive youth development philosophy with them

Community capacity is also being built beyond the "Adventure Central Hub." One example is a pilot after-school program implemented at a Dayton Public School facility. Through a partnership with Dayton Public Schools and the University of Dayton, Adventure Central moved a

former college intern into a leadership role for this new after-school program. Building capacity of University of Dayton students is another example where Adventure Central staff members have developed and taught sessions on building relationships with youth to over 1,800 University of Dayton student volunteers. These students have an impact through their volunteer work in Dayton during the school year and in their home communities. They carry with them the philosophy of positive youth development that is the foundation of Adventure Central's program.

Finally, building a community-based program prepares people who then go out and work with youth in a variety of settings. Individuals trained through our program are moving into other work settings in the community where they are applying their skills in schools and non-profit organizations.

Building capacity extends beyond the local community. Through disseminating scholarly work, conducting training and serving as a model, we are also building capacity in Ohio and nationally.

On the macro level, we are engaged in scholarly work that will help build organizational capacity in areas such as leadership, partnerships, evaluation, and funding.

Summary

This paper summarized the people, place, and programs that comprise Adventure Central, an urban youth education center in Dayton, Ohio. Adventure Central models principles of positive youth development and connects the home, school, and after-

school environments of its participants. We propose that Adventure Central is a model of outreach and engagement in an urban community. Peters (2002) contends that what he defines as "educational organizing" was "at the heart of both the theory and practice of [early] Extension agents' work" and is consistent with current calls for engagement on the part of land-grant universities. We believe the work that we are doing at Adventure Central is both in keeping with this tradition, and on target with the present needs and future issues of our target audience.

There is a certain synergy at Adventure Central that is created by the setting, the activities that take place in the setting, and the people involved in leading the activities. Adventure Central's role as a "demonstration plot" for positive youth development programming continues to evolve. We believe the success of Adventure Central can be judged not only by its success in the local community, but by its ability to influence the practice of youth development programs on a larger scale.



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